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Program companion website: <http://www.pbs.org/almosthome/>

ALMOST HOME TO PREMIERE ON INDEPENDENT LENS, HOSTED BY EDIE FALCO, ON TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2006 AT 10 PM (Check local listings)

Warm and Inspiring, ALMOST HOME Chronicles a Year in the Life of a Milwaukee Nursing Home that is Implementing a Revolutionary New Approach to the Challenge of Making a Nursing Home Feel Like *Home*

ALMOST HOME is a feature-length, cinema verité documentary chronicling a year in the life of a vibrant and revolutionary retirement community in America's Midwest. It will premiere on the Emmy Award winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, in January 2006, just as the first wave of baby boomers, born in 1946, turns 60. As the 76 million strong Boomer generation rounds that momentous corner, 50% of Americans will be reckoning with either their own aging or that of a loved one. It's not an easy task for a generation steeped in denial about getting older and frightened by the specter of dependency. We prefer to combat aging with pills, creams, surgery, and humor instead of understanding its realities and planning ahead, and the media only deepens the denial by serving up only images of "positive aging" like 90-year-old parachuters, while shunning images of frailty and dementia. **ALMOST HOME**, airing on Independent Lens, hosted by Edie Falco, on Tuesday, February 21, 2006 at 10 PM (check local listings) rescues *real* stories of aging — frightening, tender, funny, surprising and honest — from an exile of denial.

The stories in **ALMOST HOME** unfold at Saint John's on the Lake in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a retirement community (independent living, assisted living and nursing home) reinventing its 135-year-old medical model of care (think *hospital*) into a social one (think *home*). The visionaries behind this "culture-change" revolution seek to tear down traditional walls between residents, staff, and families and to replace the stigma of nursing homes as institutions of boredom and despair with a vision of "community" where residents have choices and live rich and fulfilling lives. To succeed, they will have to win over skeptical managers, resistant nurses mired in regulations, overworked and underpaid nursing assistants, and complacent residents and families accustomed to being excluded from many of the decisions that affect them.

Told through memorable characters and true-life drama, **ALMOST HOME** gives viewers an inside and personal look into the lives of many residents, their families and those who care for them. The film follows one couple bonded by their struggle with Alzheimer's and another divided by the challenges of Parkinson's; "sandwich generation" children torn between caring for their parents and caring for their own children and careers; nursing assistants doing crucial but unsavory work for poverty wages while juggling precarious lives at home; healthy seniors who fear the day they may have to move to the dreaded nursing home; and a visionary nursing home director feverishly working to alleviate such fear by transforming his impersonal, regimented, hospital-like institution into a warm "home" that promotes autonomy and inspires independence instead of fear.

Through these personal stories, the film explores several issues that have affected or will affect all our lives including coping with disability and dementia, adapting to how aging changes marriages and other relationships, negotiating caregiving responsibilities, preparing for the end of life, dealing with the economics of nursing home care, and searching for the best possible way to live out our final years. But far from being depressing, **ALMOST HOME** tells a surprising story that grips you from the start, never flinches from reality, and offers hope where many think there is none.

Some of the People in ALMOST HOME

John George is the young, hip manager of the nursing home and the lead visionary of Saint John's culture change movement. Despite dissension and resistance that threatens to derail his mission, John stays focused on creating a place that reverses the negative memories he carries with him from childhood visits to the nursing home where his mom worked.

Edie and Lloyd Herrold, once notables on Milwaukee's social circuit, are now separated by Lloyd's Parkinson's disease, which forces him to move from their independent living apartment into the nursing home downstairs. While Edie wrestles with her guilt at not providing his care, anger at his condition and fear of losing her own health, Lloyd discovers a surprising new life. Even though his physical state declines, he finds himself supported by a staff committed to forming meaningful relationships. With their encouragement, he discovers new joy in his children and, unexpectedly, falls in love with one of his fellow nursing home residents.

Their daughter, also named **Edie**, is caught between her parents in Milwaukee and her life 350 miles away in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her mother depends on her to handle their finances and her dad depends on her to deliver the emotional support he no longer gets from his wife. Meanwhile, she is trying to rekindle her flickering career as a music composer in between frequent visits to Milwaukee.

Amy Blumenthal is devoted to her mother, **Arienne Balser**, who suffered a stroke that deadened her left side and contorted her hand into a ball of bone and flesh. Endlessly faithful, Amy visits her mother regularly and is vigilant about working with Saint John's nurses while also caring for two young daughters and holding down a demanding job. Part of the "sandwich" generation caring for parents and children, Amy is on a quest to balance her hectic life. When her mother has a second stroke, her balancing act becomes even tougher.

Bob Haig is a healthy 90-year-old who still works in the photography studio where he made portraits of nearly every famous Milwaukeean. He is struggling to adjust to the disappearance of **Dolores**, his wife who is succumbing to Alzheimer's. Angry at losing her and the globetrotting life they once shared, he sometimes lashes out at the nursing home staff. Other times he pretends that the disease doesn't exist, dressing her each morning complete with full makeup, and taking her to parties. He eventually comes to terms with Dolores' fate, and is left to wrestle with his own loneliness.

Like most of Saint John's CNAs (certified nursing assistant), **Enchantra Cosey** is poor, African American, and a single mom. Despite the challenge of raising her daughter, two grandchildren fathered by one of her two teenage sons, and coping with the incarceration of both sons, she finds time to study at night and go to classes to obtain a GED. Each morning she rides the 5:30 AM bus to work but at night she dreams of one day becoming Saint John's director of nursing.

Ralph Nelson woodworks, attends plays, and cracks a lot of jokes. After losing his wife 12 years ago, he is finally ready to date again. A fixture at cocktail parties, Ralph pours his heart into everything he does, from leading trash pick-up brigades to building medicine carts for Saint John's. He'll do most anything...except cross the threshold of the nursing home. Terrified of becoming frail or sick, his refrain is "just let me wake up dead, that would be the neating thing." Ralph is just the person **John George** hopes to comfort by achieving a culture change that makes the nursing home less frightening.

www.almosthomedoc.org. The **ALMOST HOME** interactive companion website (www.pbs.org/independentlens/almosthome/) features detailed information on the film, an interview with the filmmakers as well as links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.